

When the family from Georgia comes for a visit

by Bill Kent



Hidden Creek and Skilak Lake on Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. USFWS

Originally ran July 1, 2005.

My older brother, the minister from Georgia, brought his new wife for a visit last month. He has come to see our family at least twice before, and now believes himself an expert on Alaska and how best to visit the Last Frontier. My parents' rule of never arguing with my brother resurrected itself, and I prudently avoided correcting his inaccuracies on various topics. I certainly did not miss playing the travel agent role. The best part of their visit was watching my new sister-in-law taking in everything; this was her first time in Alaska, and the sheer size of our state and its wonders were nearly overwhelming for her.

You could see the near disbelief when my sister-in-law saw what my wife and I have taken for granted for so long. She wasn't shy, and asked lots of questions. Many of our answers were a strain for her to grasp, as the immensity of Alaska is often overpowering for the newly arrived visitor. My wife and I have fallen into the same trap as many who live in Alaska—we are guilty of not seeing the forest for the trees. But, with every one of my sister-in-law's questions, more and more of the forest became visible once again; it sometimes takes watching another person trying to come to terms with the abundance of Alaska to regain one's perspective.

Although I am desk-bound more than I ever expected to be when I began working on national wildlife refuges in the late 1970s, I continue to enjoy speaking to visitors whenever I get the opportunity. For one thing, these conversations remind me how proud I am of the Kenai Refuge and of the National Wildlife Refuge System in general; there is no other system of lands like it anywhere in the world. My wife and I have lived in some of the most beautiful parts of this country, and we have been able to hunt, fish and observe wildlife at each of these stops along the way; those activities were available because there was a local National Wildlife Refuge nearby. In many cases, these refuges were the only areas where you could enjoy a natural landscape for many miles around.

Here in Alaska, I hear people complaining that there is too much land in refuges, parks, and national forests. A couple of trips to the Lower-48 might cure that view. As human development continues its exponential growth down there, less and less land is available when we visit to enjoy the hunting, fishing, hiking, boating or other recreational activities that we pursue so handily here in Alaska. Have the folks complaining about too much public land fallen victim to the "not-seeing-the-forest-for-the-trees" syndrome?

For me it only takes a visit by someone coming to Alaska for the first time to be reminded that we live in a most magnificent land. A land that, because of the protection afforded by refuges, parks and state and national forests will remain available for our use and enjoyment for many years and hopefully forever. Thanks, sister-in-law, for reminding me of how lucky we are to live in the Great Land, with all of its still beautiful land.

Bill Kent has been the Supervisory Park Ranger at Kenai National Wildlife Refuge since 1991; he and his family live in Sterling. Earlier in his career Bill worked at Okefenokee, Merritt Island, Parker River, and Klamath Basin National Wildlife Refuges. Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.